Phenomenology and Eschatology
Not Yet in the Now

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Chapter 3
Sacramental Imagination and Eschatology

Richard Kearney

"Only through singularities can we find the divine."

Spinoza

Contemporary philosophical discourse on the religious can generally fall into three categories: protest, prophecy and sacrament. In the present essay, I would like to focus on the third step, beyond the indispensable labor of iconoclasm, apophasis and mourning, namely, the sacramental return to the holiness of the everyday.

Sacraments differ from signs and symbols insofar as they embody the transcendent in the immanent, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the not-yet in the now. I am using "sacramental" here in a more general sense than that of ecclesial "sacraments" (though it can include these) to cover those re-awakenings of the divine within the singular events of quotidian existence. In doing so, the logic of the sacramental obeys that of an inaugurated eschatology. Teresa of Avila argued that true mystical experience testifies to this sacramental movement from mystical meditation back to the ordinary universe. After the forgetfulness of self and detachment from possessions in silent meditation, she speaks of returning to a life of service to others in the world, reminding us of the "sacred humanity" of Christ. The ultimate step in mystical abandonment and eschatological hope is a sanctification of our mundane existence: "Know that the Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly."[1] "The Creator," she always insisted, "must be sought through creatures."[2] This sacramental return to the everyday signals a *via affirmativa* after the *via negativa* of detachment and disenchantment. Beyond the dark caesuras of existence — the sunderings of history or of individual souls — the eschatology of the present promises a second consecration of the life-world. It embodies, in Ricoeur's phrase, "*la joie du oui dans la tristesse du fini.*"[3]

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[1] Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 5.8. I am grateful to Anthony Steinbock whose work, *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), examines this question in detail; see especially pp. 64–5.

[2] Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 22, 7–8; cited in Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 62.

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *L'Homme Faillible* (Paris : Aubier-Montaigne, 1960), 156.

The sacramental invokes the power of "yes" in the wake of "no." This is a powerless power that is ultimately more gracious and effective than the most powerful of powers. It is the possibility of a God after God (*ana-theos*) which signals the return to God after the setting aside (*ana-thema*) of God. Here anathema takes on the double sense of not only heretical condemnation — its colloquial connotation — but also of a radical consecration or setting apart as holy. Condemnation as precondition of consecration. Separation as prelude to sanctity. Withdrawal as precursor to consent. We thus recover the original sense of "anathema" as a thing devoted to the divine.

In the light of this *anathema-anatheos* paradox, I will suggest in this essay that the sacramental return presupposes a certain "negative capability" which keeps us vigilant towards strange signs of the divine beyond the dichotomy between theism and atheism. In other words, the sacramental move, as I understand it, signals the possibility of a second God set apart from a first God of metaphysical dogmatism. It marks an opening towards a God whose descent into flesh depends on our response to the sacred solicitation of the moment. This calls for a special attentiveness to infinity embodying itself in daily acts of eucharistic love and sharing. An endless crossing over and back between the infinite and infinitesimal. Here the highest deity becomes, kenotically, the "very least of these." The Word becomes everyday flesh. On-going and interminable gift. Transubstantiation.

This sacramental paradigm not only characterizes the final movement of what I call "anatheism" (i.e., the passing from protest to prophesy and from prophesy to the retrieval of the sacred in the everyday), it also comprises what I have elsewhere termed a "micro-eschatology."[4] In other words, the consecration of the mundane which, I will suggest, characterizes Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh allows us to re-conceive eschatology. No longer forced to choose between the triumphal macro-eschatologies of an omnipotent God and the anonymous causality of atheistic scientism, the retrieval of the eschatological in the everyday allows us to rethink eschatology as occurring somewhere between these alternatives.

A Phenomenology of the Flesh

What, if anything, can contemporary philosophy tell us about the anatheist option of sacramental incarnation? What light might it cast on the everyday marvel of Word becoming living flesh?

The theme of "flesh" was largely ignored by Western metaphysics since Plato. This may seem strange given the fact that almost fifteen hundred years of the history of metaphysics comprised what Etienne Gilson called the "Christian synthesis" of Greek and Biblical thought. But metaphysics (with some notable

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[4] Cf., my contributions in John Panteleimon Manoussakis (ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

exceptions like Duns Scotus before scholasticism or Thomas before Thomism) managed to take the flesh and blood out of Christian incarnation leaving us with abstract conceptual and categorical equivalents. There were the mystics of course, whose lives and confessions testified to the mystery of transcendent immanence; but these were invariably sidelined (Eckhart and the Beguines, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avilla, Margaret Porete). The Citadel of Metaphysics was not breached by their heart-felt "heresies," or, if it was, remained deeply suspect. It resisted all such infiltrations of the flesh-smitten spirit from without and from within. Even poor Aquinas, as noted, had the mystical harm taken out of him, his initial nerve and brio reduced to a caricature of itself. The edifice of Onto-Theology admitted of no gaps, no risks, no wagers. Immune to the daring of quotidian incarnation — the constant daily coming into flesh of the divine (*ensarkosis*, as Scotus called it) — Metaphysics stood firm, indubitable, *intactus*.

In terms of mainstream Western philosophy, it would, I will argue, take Husserl and the modern phenomenological revolution to bring Western philosophy back to the experience of "sacramental flesh," that is, the possibility of acknowledging Spirit in our most basic pre-reflective lived experience. Edmund Husserl blazed a path towards a phenomenology of the flesh when he broached the crucial theme of the living body (*Leib*).[5] In order to open up a space where neglected notions of embodiment might be re-visited in a fresh experiential light, Husserl considered it essential to operate his famous *epoche*. This involved the bracketing of all previous presuppositions — in this instance, everything we thought we knew about the flesh. This suspension of received wisdoms ran all the way down, from the heights of metaphysics to the most basic prejudices of common sense: a whole gamut of assumptions which Husserl lumped together under the label of the "natural attitude." In other words, the natural attitude which Husserl's phenomenological method sought to put out of play covered a wide variety of taken-for-granted views about what the "flesh" actually is: accredited opinions informed by inherited speculative systems (realist or idealist), positive sciences like biology, physics and chemistry, or any number of cultural, social and ideological attitudes. And it also, needless to say, included religious doctrines and dogmas about the body, sex,

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[5] Husserl, *Ideas II*, *Cartesian Meditations* and the *Crisis*. See the excellent commentary by Didier Franck, *Chair et Corps: Sur la Phénoménologie de Husserl* (ed. De Minuit, Paris, 1981) as well as by French phenomenologists like Jean-Luc Marion (*Being Given, In Excess*, and *The Erotic Phenomenon*) and Jean-Louis Chretien (*Hand to Hand*, Fordham University Press, 1993). William Desmond also has interesting philosophical points to make about the sacredness of the flesh in his recent essays on "consecration." See also the work of Catherine Keller, *Face of The Deep: A theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and John Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007). Nor should we omit reference here to Gabriel Marcel's intriguing philosophical reflections on incarnation and embodiment, which exerted a considerable influence on the "religious" phenomenological writings of Ricoeur and Levinas.

desire and sin. Once all such inherited attitudes were suspended, Husserl wagered that the phenomena themselves would be allowed to speak for themselves in their simple, ordinary everydayness. The hypothesis was that *after* the *epoche* of received opinion, the things of experience would be invited, without censure, to show themselves forth from themselves as they are in themselves, that is, in all their multilayered — sensible, affective, intelligible, spiritual — *thereness*. In this manner, experiences of the flesh, all too often neglected by Western metaphysics, would be re-described in a new and unprejudiced light.[6]

Husserl himself, however, only pointed in this direction. He blazed the trail and took some steps along the path, but he did not enter or occupy the terrain. His own work, however pioneering, remained a matter of promissory notes, missionary manifestos, half finished charts, logs and maps. For all his talk of returning us to the "things themselves," Husserl remained caught in the nets of transcendental idealism and never quite escaped the limits of theoretical cognition. It would be for his followers to drop anchor and bring the expeditionary flotilla to shore. Heidegger, one might argue, advanced the project of a phenomenology of flesh with his existential analytic of "moods" and "facticity," but the fact remains that Heideggerian *Dasein* has no real sense of a living body: Dasein does not eat or sleep or have sex. It too remains, despite all the talk of "being-in-the-world," captive to the transcendental lure. Other disciples of Husserl went further, but while Scheler and Stein made sorties into a phenomenology of feeling and Sartre offered fine insights into shame and desire, it is really only with Merleau-Ponty that we witness a fully-fledged phenomenology of flesh. Here at last, the body is no longer treated as a mere project, cipher or icon, but as *flesh itself* in all its ontological depth. The ghost of metaphysical idealism is finally laid to rest. We return to the body in all its unfathomable *thisness*.

It is telling, I think, that Merleau-Ponty chose to describe his phenomenology of the sensible body in sacramental language. This terminological option amounts to nothing less, I submit, than a eucharistics of profane perception. Let me take some examples. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1944), we read:

> Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but *is* also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon

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[6] See James Morley, "Embodied Consciousness in Tantric Yoga and the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty" in "The Interreligious Imagination" issue of the *Religion and the Arts*, ed. R. Kearney (Brill, 2008), pp. 144f. See also Edmund Husserl's statements on God, transcendence and the absolute cited in my "Hermeneutics of the Possible God" in *Givenness and God*, ed. Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 220f.

> by our body, provided that it is capable of doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion.[7]

This is a bold analogy for an existentialist writing in France in the 1940s, a time when close colleagues like Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus considered militant atheism *de rigueur*. Merleau-Ponty goes on to delineate this eucharistic power of the sensible as follows:

> I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary law.[8]

It is a curious paradox that when Merleau-Ponty traces the "phenomenological return" all the way down to the lowest rung of experience (in the old metaphysical ladder, the *sensible*), he discovers there the most sacramental act of communion. This is intimately related to his notion of chiasmic crossing of ostensible contraries: the most in the least, the first in the last, the invisible in the visible. Here we have a reversal of Platonism and Idealism, and a return to flesh as our most intimate "element," namely, that which enfolds and envelopes us in the systole and diastole of being, the seeing and being seen of vision. Phenomenology thus marks the surpassing of traditional dualisms such as body/mind, real/ideal, inner/outer, subject/object. This is how Merleau-Ponty describes the enigma of flesh as mutual crossing-over in his posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964): "The seer is caught up in what he sees ... the vision he exercises, he also undergoes from the things, such that, as many painters have said, I feel myself looked at by the things, my activity." So much so that "the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this Visibility, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it."[9] It is here, I suggest, that Merleau-Ponty gets to the heart of this nameless matter and descends — in a final return, a last reduction that suspends all previous reductions — to the incarnate region of the "element":

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[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), 246. I am grateful to John Panteleimon Manoussakis for this reference. See an extended discussion of this theme in chapter seven of his *God after Metaphysics*.

[8] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 248.

[9] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); cited in my *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester University Press, 1986), 88–9.

> The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of Being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible (the thing as well as my body) some "psychic" material that would be — God knows how — brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body. In general, it is not a fact or a sum of facts "material" or "spiritual."

No, insists Merleau-Ponty:

> the flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we would need the ancient term "element," in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing* midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of Being wherever there is a fragment of Being. The flesh is in this sense an "element" of Being.[10]

Returning to examples of painting — Cézanne and Klee — in *Eye and Mind* (1964), Merleau-Ponty expounds on this chiasmic model of the flesh as a mutual transubstantiation of the seer and the seen in a "miracle" of flesh:

> There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted ... There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here. It is mute Being which itself comes to show forth its own meaning.[11]

In *Signs* (1960), a collection of essays devoted to questions of language and art, Merleau-Ponty repeats his claim that the flesh of art is invariably indebted to the bread of life. There is nothing so insignificant in the life of the artist, he claims, that is not eligible for "consecration" in the painting or poem. But the "style" which the artist creates converts his corporeal situation into a sacramental witness at a higher level of "repetition" and "recreation." The art work still refers to the life-world from which it springs, but opens up a second order reference of creative possibility and freedom. Speaking specifically of Leonardo da Vinci, he writes:

> If we take the painter's point of view in order to be present at that decisive moment when what has been given to him to live as corporeal destiny, personal adventures or historical events, crystallizes into "the motive" (i.e., the style), we will recognize that his work, which is never an effect, is always a response to these data and that the body, the life, the landscapes, the schools, the mistresses, the creditors, the police and the revolutions which might suffocate painting are

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[10] Ibid., 89.

[11] Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind in Continental Aesthetics*, ed. R. Kearney and D. Rasmussen (Blackwell, 2001), 288f.

> also *the bread his work consecrates.* To live in painting is still to breathe the air of this world.[12]

In short, the bread of the world is the very stuff consecrated in the body of the work.

Merleau-Ponty is no theologian and certainly no Christian apologist, but he has an intriguing interpretation of Christian embodiment as a restoration of the divine within the flesh, a kenotic emptying out of transcendence into the heart of the world's body, becoming a God *beneath* us rather than a God *beyond* us:

> The Christian God wants nothing to do with a vertical relation of subordination. He is not simply a principle of which we are the consequence, a will whose instruments we are, or even a model of which human values are the only reflection. There is a sort of impotence of God without us, and Christ attests that God would not be fully God without becoming fully man. Claudel goes so far as to say that God is not above but beneath us — meaning that we do not find Him as a suprasensible idea, but as another ourself which dwells in and authenticates our darkness. Transcendence no longer hangs over man; he becomes, strangely, its privileged bearer.[13]

When it comes to expressing love for another human being, Merleau-Ponty sees the presence of this "transcendence" in the promise we make to another beyond what we can know or realize in the present moment. The absolute which the lover looks for beyond our experience is implied in it. Just as I grasp time by being present, I perceive others through my individual life, "in the tension of an experience which transcends itself." There is thus, Merleau-Ponty suggests, "no destruction of the absolute ... only of the absolute separated from existence. To tell the truth, Christianity consists in replacing the separated absolute by the absolute in men. Nietzsche's idea that God is dead is already contained in the Christian idea of the death of God. God ceases to be an external object in order to mingle in human life, and this life is not simply a return to a non-temporal conclusion. God needs human history. As Malebranche said, 'the world is unfinished'." Merleau-Ponty realizes that official Christianity might not concur with this, but he suggests that "some Christians might agree that the other side of things must already be visible in the environment in which we live."[14]

Finally, in his Lectures on "Nature," delivered at the Collège de France between 1956 and 1960, Merleau-Ponty adumbrates what I would consider to be some basic anatheist insights. Arguing the need to think God in relation to Nature, Merleau-

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[12] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); cited in *Modern Movements*, p. 85.

[13] Ibid., pp. 83–4.

[14] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Inaugural Lecture to the 'Société Française'" in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Eddie (Evanston, Il: Northwestern UP, 1964), pp. 27f.

Ponty objects to any theism which takes God out of the world. This he associates with a certain Christian "acosmism" — or anti-worldliness — epitomized in the equation of true and total being with a God beyond the world. Such a removal of divinity from the natural and human world threatens to plunge this world into a state of non-being or nothingness. Merleau-Ponty links this to a special "malaise of Judeo-Christian ontology" which he defines thus: "Such a monotheism carries along with it in all rigor the consequence that the world is not. 'From the moment when we say that God is Being, it is clear that in a certain sense God alone is.' Judeo-Christian thinking is haunted by the threat of acosmism."[15] But this a-cosmic expression of Judeo-Christian belief is of course historically specific; it is a particular metaphysical account of the divine, and its relationship to nature, which became dominant in western philosophy and theology. Like Nietzsche before him, Merleau-Ponty identifies this orthodox account with a disguised nihilism: to equate God with a timeless, otherworldly Being, which is the sovereign cause of itself and has no desire for nature or humanity — as Descartes and the rationalists did — is to reject the sanctity of the flesh. "To posit God as Being is to bring about a negation of the world."[16] And it is also, Merleau-Ponty hastens to add, a betrayal of the original message of Incarnation — the Logos becoming Flesh and entering into the heart of suffering and acting humanity.

In reaction to this version of metaphysical theism, Merleau-Ponty calls for the recognition of a genuinely a-theistic moment in the Christian story of incarnation and crucifixion where Christ experiences a radical abandonment before the father: "My God My God why have you forsaken me?" Merleau-Ponty concludes by contrasting acosmic theism with a genuine Judeo-Christian alternative that he identifies with the sacramental engagement with the world, epitomized by the Worker-Priest movement in France in the fifties which also found expression in liberation theology and in the attention to what he calls "minorities," namely, the marginalized and rejected ones. This is his critical diagnosis of acosmic theism: "God is beyond all Creation. Theism comes from this position, and moves towards that of no longer distinguishing the critique of false Gods ... And as Kierkegaard said, no one can be called Christian; faith must become unfaith. There is an atheism in Christianity, religion of God made man, where Christ dies, abandoned by God."[17] But Merleau-Ponty does not end there. He appends the following summary prognosis: "It may be, says a hymn, that the passion of Christ is not in vain ... See the adventure of the priest-workers, as awareness that we cannot place God apart from humanity suffering in history; hence, so that God may be realized,

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[15] Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Compiled by Dominique Seglard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 133.

[16] Ibid., p. 137.

[17] Ibid., pp. 137–8.

(we need) the sorting out of humans who are the furthest from God ... because minorities are the salt of the Earth!"[18]

In short, Merleau-Ponty believes that we need a new, non-dogmatic relation to Nature and thus to God that opens onto the minor, the different, the incarnate. Recognizing the radical consequences of incarnation for our understanding of both God and Nature is, for Merleau-Ponty, an ana-theist alternative to the endless doctrinal disputes between theism and atheism. In this sense, I suspect that Merleau-Ponty might have agreed with the proposal by post-secular thinkers like Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur that we move beyond those "religions" disfigured by otherworldly metaphysics to a faith in the divine potential inherent in the everyday secular life of action and suffering, of attention and service to others. But where Merleau-Ponty seems to differ somewhat from Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur is in supplementing their "prophetic" voice of protest (informed by their war experience of imprisonment) with a "sacramental" acoustic of existence. In this he might be said to add a more "Catholic" style to the "Protestant" iconoclasm of Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur, though in both cases we are speaking of a post-religious expression of these confessional cultures. By relocating the moment of sacred transcendence in the immanence of nature, Merleau-Ponty is restoring Logos to the flesh of the world. And, by extension, he is replacing the idea of a triumphal eschatology with a micro-eschatology of the incarnate now.

Phenomenological Method and the Sacramentality of the Sensible

This insight of "immanent transcendence" is not of course unique to Merleau-Ponty. Many Christian mystics — from John of the Cross to Hildegarde of Bingen and Meister Eckhart — said similar things, as did Jewish sages like Rabbi Luria and Rosenzweig, or Sufi masters like Rumi and Ibn'Arabi. Indeed I am also reminded here of the bold claim by Teilhard de Chardin that God does not direct the universe from above but underlies it and "prolongs himself" into it. Or indeed of the suggestion by Max Scheler that Francis of Assisi's sacramental vision of the natural world represented a profound "heresy of the heart" which broke from previous metaphysical doctrines of Christianity as acosmic denial of the flesh. Scheler is of special relevance here, given his close links with phenomenology. Arguing that the sacrament of the Eucharist shows how Christian love may "acquire a footing in the living and organic, through its 'magical' identification with the body and blood of our Lord under the forms of bread and wine,"[19] Scheler suggests that these came to be virtually the *only* natural substances, in a very ritualized setting of Holy Communion, which permitted a union with the cosmos

[18] Ibid., p. 138. My thanks to Kascha Semon for bringing many of these passages to my attention.

[19] Max Scheler, "The Sense of Unity with the Cosmos" in *The Nature of Sympathy* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), p. 87.

— until, that is, mystics like Francis and Claire of Assisi came to embody this communion in their everyday lives, restoring sacramentality to the living universe of nature, animals and humans. Francis's bold "heresy," in Scheler's view, was to have challenged the enormous *gulf* between humans and nature, introduced by "traditional Christian doctrine," addressing as Francis did both fire and water, sun and moon, animals and plants, as "brothers and sisters." Against the a-cosmic tendencies of mainstream Christianity, Francis's bold achievement was to combine love of God with the sense of "union with the life and being of Nature."[20] His greatness was to have expanded the specifically Christian emotion of love for God the Father to embrace "all the lower orders of nature," while at the same time uplifting Nature into the glory of the divine.[21] Most of Francis' contemporaries thought him "strange and unconventional," some heretical and mad. Here was a mystic who dared conjoin transcendence and immanence, the sacred and the secular, by calling all creatures his brothers, and by looking with "the heart's keen insight into the inmost being of every creature, just as though he had already entered into the freedom of glory of the children of God."[22] This view that God is in all beings was condemned as atheistic blasphemy by many orthodox Christians before and after Francis. But for Francis, as Scheler recognizes, it was a way of restoring God to the world, of rediscovering a living God amidst the ashes of a dead one.[23]

Merleau-Ponty would, I think, be in agreement with many of these expressions of sacred immanence, found in different mystics of the great Wisdom traditions. But Merleau-Ponty is a philosopher, not an apologist nor an historian of religions. What he provides is a specific philosophical method — namely, a phenomenology of radical embodiment — to articulate this phenomenon of sacramental flesh. And it is to be noted that a number of recent phenomenologists have followed Merleau-Ponty's lead when seeking to inventory the sacred dimensions of the flesh. I am thinking here especially of Jean-Luc Marion's writings on the "flesh" as a saturated phenomenon in *On Excess* or Jean-Louis Chrétien's hermeneutical commentary on the *Song of Songs*. But Merleau-Ponty has the advantage, in my view, of not only being the first phenomenologist to explicitly explore the sacramental valence of the sensible but also to observe a certain methodological agnosticism with regard to the theistic/atheistic implications of this phenomenon, an agnosticism which opens up the anatheist option.

Merleau-Ponty is no crypto-evangelist. On the contrary, he consistently sustains the methodic suspension of confessional truth-claims recommended by

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[20] Ibid., p. 87.

[21] Ibid., p. 87.

[22] Ibid., p. 88.

[23] Scheler's work was informed by Husserl's phenomenological investigations but lacked the rigor of the phenomenological method, opting instead for a more romantic, eclectic and holistic view of the subject in his writings on feeling and sympathy, cf. *On Feeling, Knowing and Valuing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Husserl. And this chimes well, it seems to me, with the poetic license enjoyed by artists and writers when it comes to the marvel of transubstantiation in word, sound or image. For poetic license entails a corollary confessional license from which no one is excluded. In this respect, we could say that the phenomenological method — which brackets beliefs — is analogous to the literary suspending of belief and dis-belief for the sake of inclusive entry to the "kingdom of as-if." This suspension allows for a specific "negative capability" (Keats) regarding questions of doubt, proof, dogma or doctrine, so as to better appreciate the "thing itself," the holy *thisness* and *thereness* of our flesh and blood existence. The attitude of pure attention that follows from such exposure to a "free variation of imagination" (the term is Husserl's) is not far removed, I believe, from what certain mystics have recognized to be a crucial preparatory moment for sacramental vision, calling it by such different names as "the cloud of unknowing," the *docta ignorantia* or, in Eastern mysticism, the *neti/net* — neither this nor that — a moment which paves the way for the deepest wisdom of reality. True belief traverses non-belief. In the free variation of imagination, indispensable to the phenomenological method, everything is permissible. Nothing is excluded except exclusion. All is possible. By allowing us to attend to the sacramental marvel of the everyday without the constraints of particular confessions, Merleau-Ponty offers fresh insights into the eucharistic character of the sensible.

Messianic Time

Another aspect of micro-eschatology is what Walter Benjamin calls "weak messianism." This seeks to honor the forgotten voices of history by retrieving their "impeded possibilities," thereby emancipating the past into a future.[24] This eschatological giving of a future to the past is witnessed for example in Gen 3.15 when Yahweh tells Moses that he is not just the God of ancestral memory but the promise that "will be" with his people in their struggle for emancipation. "I am who will be with you." I am the God who may be, can be, shall be, if you listen to my summons and choose liberty over slavery, life over death, *eros* over *thanatos*. And this same eschatological paradox of past-as-future is at work in the Palestinian formula of the Passover which instructs us to remember the feast of the Passover "until he comes." It is reprised in the Christian invocation of "anticipatory memory" at the Last Supper (I Corinthians 11:25–6: "for as often

[24] See also Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 2004) and also our discussion of giving a future to the "unfulfilled possibilities" of the past in "Capable Man" in *Paul Ricoeur: the New Hermeneutics*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Venema (forthcoming). For a fuller treatment of this theme of messianism in relation to Derrida, Levinas and Ricoeur in Chapter 3 of my *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes"); and it finds additional echoes in John the Baptist's famous avowal of Jesus "The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me" (John 1:15).

The Messianic exists before us ("before Abraham was I am") as the possibility which lies ahead of us. It heralds the one who comes *after* every "god" we presume to possess, the sacred stranger who is always in front of us, always to come. Which is surely why Jesus refuses the allure of self-possessed power, priority and privilege, insisting that he be baptized by John rather than the contrary. "I need to be baptized by you," says John bemusedly, "and yet you are coming to me?" (Matthew 3.15). The washing of the apostles' feet (John 13) and subsequent enduring of death for others rather than the assumption of imperial power, signals the eschatological conversion of sovereignty into hospitality. It epitomizes the anatheist option for self-emptying service to strangers.

The eschatological reversal of Sovereign Being is echoed in the overturning of Sovereign Knowledge. Jesus does not *tell* his disciples who he is; he *asks* them who he is! "Who do they say that I am" (Mark 8:27). And just as the voice in the burning bush refuses to impart some sacred name of magical power, replying instead with a riddling pun: "I am who I shall be" — so too Jesus resists all attempts to apprehend him in any definite or categorical way. In fact it is only the demons who claim to *know* Jesus, as in the exchange with the unclean spirit at Capernaum who called out "I *know* who you are — the Holy One of God!" To which Jesus responds: "Be quiet! Come out of him" (Matthew 1.24). Even when Peter announces "You are the Christ," Jesus warns him to tell no one and actually denounces him as "Satan" for trying to dissuade him from going to his death (not a thing an omnipotent God should do!) (Mark 8:30–33). Is it not significant, moreover, that whenever Jesus is pressed to reveal himself "as he is," he constantly refers to the Father, or the Pentecost or the "least of these"? Is it not highly telling that he defers to *others* in a process of kenotic self-emptying? So that if he indeed admits he is the "Way the truth and the life," it is always a way that leads to others, a way that opens onto other ways. "You cannot reach the Father *except* through me," he boldly announces, calling for the radical exclusion of exclusion itself. For who cannot be counted among the "least of these"? Or among the "strangers" who hunger and thirst? The messianic way leads from Sovereign Self to excluded stranger, breaching the highest in the name of the lowest, the first in the name of the last. Which is why, as I argue elsewhere, I keep repeating that interconfessional hospitality towards other faiths and cultures is not just an option for Christians but an imperative. Christian *caritas*, as a refusal of exclusivist power, is a summons to endless *kenosis*.[25]

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[25] See R. Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* and also *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, edited by C Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Sarah Coakley's illuminating chapter on "Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of 'Vulnerability' in Christian Feminist Writing" in her

It is in a similar spirit, I suggest, that we may choose to read the frequent injunctions against idols and graven images in both Judaism and Islam. Namely, as a refusal to possess the sacredness of the wholly Other in anthropomorphic projections and illusions. In all three Abrahamic traditions we find evidence of a *via negativa* which safeguards the "strangeness" of the divine. This is why it is so important to constantly recall the anatheist moment of *not-knowing* at the very heart of spiritual experience: not as a threat to faith but as an integral part of the journey towards the Other. The anatheist wager is not some postmodern gloss on Descartes's doubt but a movement of decision recognized as essential to genuine spiritual quest, as Steinbock points out in his analysis of the testimonies of great mystics of the Abrahamic tradition: Ruzbiahn Baqli in Islam, Rabbi Dov Baer in Judaism, and Teresa of Avila in Christianity.[26] And one finds powerful instances of this wager in numerous other mystical texts from Gregory of Nyssa's notion of an unbridgeable gap (*diastema*) between human understanding and the irreducible strangeness of God to Bonaventure's famous definition of faith as a never-ending "pilgrim's progress" of many winding paths (*itinerarium mentis in Deum*). These all testify to an anatheist gesture of detachment from assumed faith which prizes open space for a possible return to second faith. That is why Teresa of Calcutta's diary confession of loss of her original belief should not, I suggest, have provoked world-wide scandal but been seen as a salutary part of her spiritual maturation to a deeper belief.

Perhaps there can be no anatheist wager without this moment of atheism? And if this be so I am tempted to compare such a cycle of faith to the ancient Patristic figure of "circumcession" (*perichoresis*) where different persons move endlessly around an empty centre (*chora*), always deferring one to the other, the familiar to the foreign, the resident to the alien, the self to the stranger. Without the *gap* in the middle there could be no leap, no love, no faith.

Anatheism cherishes the Siamese twins of theism and atheism and celebrates the fertile tension between them. The bracing oscillation between doubt and faith, withdrawal and consent, is the aperture which precedes and follows each wager. It is the guarantee of human freedom before the summons of the other. The choice to believe or not believe is indispensable to the anatheist wager. And it is a choice made over and over again.

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volume, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 3–39.

[26] For a very illuminating discussion of comparative mystical experience in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions see Anthony Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism.*